

Developing an expressive writing program model for strengthening students' mental resilience against bullying

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ABSTRACT

Bullying remains a persistent issue in schools and continues to undermine students' emotional and psychological well-being. This paper introduces a novel conceptual model of an expressive writing program specifically designed for Indonesian schools, addressing the current gap in structured resilience-building interventions. Using a qualitative design based on secondary data from books and journal articles, this study outlines how expressive writing can be systematically integrated into school settings to strengthen students' mental resilience. The proposed model-illustrated in the program diagram-combines guided writing sessions, emotional literacy activities, and teacher-facilitated support mechanisms. The program also emphasizes teacher preparedness, safe classroom environments, and collaborative involvement from parents and counselors. Additionally, secure digital platforms are recommended to enhance accessibility and ensure confidentiality. This model is intended to guide schools in implementing proactive emotional support systems and to provide a foundation for future empirical evaluation of its effectiveness in reducing bullying and improving students' emotional well-being.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Bullying continues to pose serious psychological risks for students, including anxiety, depression, emotional disturbances, and diminished self-esteem [1]. In Indonesia, these risks are intensified by a worrying escalation in reported cases. The Indonesian Child Protection Commission (Komisi Perlindungan Anak Indonesia, KPAI) reported approximately 3,800 bullying cases in 2023, indicating a notable rise in the prevalence of bullying incidents compared to preceding years. More recent developments indicate an even more alarming situation: within just two months in 2025, six cases of school-based violence resulted in child fatalities, and by October 2025, 26 students had died by suicide, with approximately one-third of the cases triggered by situations within educational settings [2]. These trends underscore the urgent need for comprehensive systemic reform and stronger child protection mechanisms across Indonesian schools.

This national trend is further reflected in real-time data from the Online Information System for the Protection of Women and Children (Sistem Informasi Online Perlindungan Perempuan dan Anak, SIMFONI PPA), which documents cases of violence reported from 1 January 2025 onward. The database includes both verified cases, validated by authorized officers, and unverified cases, consisting of newly reported incidents that are still undergoing the verification process. The educational distribution of victims shows that

adolescents in middle school (9,064 cases) and high school (7,016 cases) constitute the most affected groups, highlighting the vulnerability of students within critical developmental stages. This situation underscores the urgent need for school-based interventions that strengthen students' mental resilience, defined as the capacity to cope with stress, recover from adversity, and maintain psychological stability [3]. Within this context, programs that support emotional processing and adaptive coping, such as expressive writing, become increasingly relevant as scalable, low-cost psychosocial strategies that schools can implement to mitigate the emotional consequences of bullying.

Expressive writing has been widely recognized as an effective psychological technique for processing emotions and managing trauma. Empirical research consistently shows that expressive writing reduces anxiety, improves emotional regulation, and enhances psychological well-being [4], [5], largely by allowing individuals to articulate suppressed emotions, a root contributor to bullying-related distress [6]. Its effectiveness aligns with theories of emotional processing, catharsis, and cognitive restructuring, suggesting that writing facilitates meaning-making and the reappraisal of negative thoughts, while also strengthening resilience against social stressors [7].

Studies in Indonesia further support its relevance: Mukhlis *et al.* [8] demonstrated significant stress reduction among students using expressive writing techniques, while Agustriyani *et al.* [9] found that expressive writing helps reduce anxiety in adolescents experiencing bullying. More recent Indonesian findings by Junita *et al.* [10] confirmed that expressive writing therapy effectively reduces anxiety among bullying victims, reinforcing its applicability within diverse cultural and educational contexts. International evidence from the United States, Australia, South Korea, and Spain also highlights its global applicability [5], [6], [11], confirming its value in emotionally supportive educational environments.

Despite this strong empirical foundation, no structured, curriculum-integrated expressive writing program currently exists in Indonesian schools. Existing studies tend to focus on outcomes rather than offering a systematic framework that schools can adopt as a preventive and resilience-building measure. This represents a clear research gap in school-based mental health interventions.

Grounded in the principles of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), catharsis theory, and neuroscience [12]–[14], the proposed model seeks to strengthen students' emotional awareness, coping strategies, and resilience in the context of bullying. The innovation of this research lies in translating psychological evidence into a systematic, culturally responsive program that can be embedded within the school curriculum.

Accordingly, this study addresses three core questions: i) How expressive writing can effectively strengthen students' mental resilience; ii) What theoretical and empirical foundations support its use as a proactive response to bullying; and iii) What essential components are needed for a structured expressive writing program in schools. By answering these questions, this research offers both theoretical contributions and practical innovation for school-based mental health promotion in Indonesia.

2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological orientation to conceptually explore the subjective dimensions embedded within an expressive writing program aimed at enhancing mental resilience and addressing bullying. Although no human participants are involved, the phenomenological orientation is applied at the conceptual level to examine the meaning-making structures, emotional processes, and psychological mechanisms embedded in the program design, aligning with the phenomenological emphasis on exploring lived meanings and emotional orientations within human experience [15]. The focus is directed toward understanding how the program theoretically enables emotional navigation and resilience development.

2.1. Research approach

The phenomenological approach in this study is applied through conceptual phenomenology, which focuses on uncovering the meanings embedded within instructional and programmatic materials [16]. Instead of collecting lived experiences from students and teachers, this study analyzes the expressive writing program through its documented components, specifically the teacher's implementation guide. This approach allows an examination of how emotional articulation, cognitive restructuring, and coping mechanisms are theoretically facilitated within the program [16]. To ensure methodological rigor, this conceptual study applies phenomenological criteria for credibility, including epoch, reflexive journaling during analysis, and the construction of thick descriptions of the program's intended experiential processes.

2.2. Expressive writing program design

The expressive writing program is conceptually examined through its structure and theoretical foundations. The program is designed to provide structured opportunities for emotional articulation and processing related to bullying and stress. Based on expressive writing theory developed by Pennebaker [17] and expanded in later research, writing about traumatic or emotional experiences is understood to facilitate emotional regulation and improve mental health [5]. The model includes four components: i) input, ii) process, iii) output, and iv) evaluation. These components are analyzed to assess clarity, internal coherence, and alignment with psychological theory.

2.2.1. Program components

The program includes several reflective and expressive writing activities:

- Daily journal: Students' daily reflection activities are examined as conceptual mechanisms that support emotional processing and psychological well-being.
- Letter to self: The self-affirmation mechanism embedded in writing letters to oneself is analysed with reference to Cohen and Sherman [18], who identify its role in strengthening self-worth and promoting positive self-reflection.
- Narrative writing about bullying experiences: Narrative writing is conceptually linked to emotional relief and resilience development, informed by Pennebaker and Chung [19], who highlight cognitive reorganization through trauma writing.

2.2.2. Program schedule and structure

The program is structured into two 30-minute sessions per week. This schedule is conceptually designed to promote the benefits associated with regular expressive writing practice. In addition, the five-step session structure is analyzed to examine its potential to facilitate emotional expression and emotional regulation among students.

2.2.3. Expected outputs

Several expected outcomes are identified within the program framework. These include improved emotional articulation, reduced emotional burden, and the development of adaptive coping strategies. Additionally, increased awareness of bullying dynamics is assessed as a theoretically grounded outcome supported by relevant psychological literature.

2.2.4. Evaluation of the program

The evaluation process relies on qualitative indicators embedded within the program guide. These indicators include patterns of emotional expression, shifts in coping strategies, and observable behavioral cues, which are assessed using reflective writing rubrics, observation checklists, and interview guides. The instruments are further analyzed conceptually to determine their alignment with the theoretical principles of expressive writing.

2.3. Research participants

Although the original program is designed for students vulnerable to bullying and supported by teachers with emotional facilitation experience, this study does not involve actual participants. Instead, this section is retained conceptually to reflect the program's intended target groups. Purposive sampling rationale and the facilitative role of teachers are used to contextualize the theoretical relevance of the program's participant design. Ethical considerations such as parental consent, confidentiality, and trauma-informed facilitation are analyzed as embedded components within the program guide.

2.4. Data collection techniques

Data in this study consist solely of the teacher's guidebook, program documents, and written instructional materials. These materials are examined using document-based qualitative techniques.

- In-depth interviews (conceptual reference)
Although real interviews are not conducted, the interview guide included in the program is analyzed conceptually to understand how it captures changes in resilience and emotional regulation [20].
- Observation (document-based analysis)
Observation procedures written in the guidebook are analyzed to assess how effectively engagement and behavioral indicators are theoretically captured [21].
- Documentation
Students' journals, letters, and narratives are analyzed conceptually through samples and templates found in the guide using narrative analysis principles [22].

2.5. Data analysis

Data analysis is performed through thematic analysis applied to program documents, templates, and instructional descriptions. The analysis identifies themes related to emotional articulation, resilience-building mechanisms, and conceptual coping shifts. Triangulation is conducted across documents, theoretical frameworks, and program components, following the understanding of triangulation as a methodological strategy to enhance analytical robustness through the integration of multiple data sources and perspectives [23]. Reliability and validity are strengthened through an audit trail of analytic decisions, peer debriefing on conceptual interpretations, a researcher's reflexivity log, and systematic coding procedures applied to the program materials.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Result

This section presents the findings of a document-based qualitative analysis of the teacher manual entitled Teacher Guidebook for Implementing an Expressive Writing Program to Address Bullying (*Panduan Guru Program Menulis Ekspresif dalam Menanggulangi Perundungan*). The guidebook served as the primary data source and provided detailed information regarding the intervention's structure, core components, implementation procedures, and pedagogical framework.

Results are organized based on four analytical focal points: i) program components, ii) session structure and implementation flow, iii) conceptual model (input–process–output–evaluation), and iv) evaluation instruments. Because this research is conceptual, the results represent constructed findings derived from document interpretation rather than empirical field data.

3.1.1. Program components identified from the teacher guidebook

Analysis of the guidebook shows that the expressive writing program contains three primary emotional-processing components, each with a specific psychological function. These confirmed components align directly with expressive writing theory and are further summarized in Table 1. These confirmed components align directly with expressive writing theory. These components collectively create a structured emotional outlet for students: i) Daily journaling encourages gradual emotional unloading and fosters consistent self-reflection; ii) Letters to self-enable constructive internal dialogue, enhancing self-compassion and resilience; iii) Narrative writing transforms disorganized emotional memories into coherent stories, allowing students to reinterpret their experiences in a psychologically healthier way.

Table 1. Program Components Extracted from the Teacher Guidebook
(*Panduan Guru Program Menulis Ekspresif dalam Menanggulangi Perundungan*)

Component	Content in the teacher's guide	Conceptual psychological function
Daily journal	Students reflect daily on emotional experiences, challenges, and events	Encourages emotional articulation; reduces accumulated emotional tension; supports continuous self-awareness
Letter to self	Students write affirming messages and guidance to their future selves	Strengthens self-worth, promotes positive self-identity, and supports CBT-based cognitive reframing
Narrative writing about bullying	Students write stories, memories, or reflections related to bullying experiences	Facilitates catharsis, trauma processing, perspective-taking, and meaning-making

3.1.2. Session structure and implementation flow

The guidebook provides a coherent session sequence that scaffolds emotional expression while maintaining student safety, as summarized in Table 2. Each session is designed to gradually guide students from grounding to emotional activation and finally to re-stabilization. This structured sequence ensures multiple layers of student support: grounding and emotional check-ins establish a sense of emotional safety, while the writing prompts guide students into focused emotional exploration. The core writing phase enables deeper therapeutic processing, and the concluding reflection facilitates cognitive integration of the experience. Collectively, this design aligns closely with trauma-informed teaching principles, which emphasize the importance of providing safe entry into and safe exit from emotionally intense learning activities.

3.1.3. Conceptual model derived from the guidebook

The teacher guide implicitly contains a structured flow, reconstructed through document analysis into an input–process–output–evaluation model, as illustrated in Figure 1. The expressive writing program operates through a clear input–process–output–evaluation model that strengthens its educational and psychological coherence. The input phase includes writing prompts, teacher guidance, emotional safety procedures, and a supportive classroom environment. The process phase involves daily journaling, self-

affirmation letters, and narrative exploration of bullying experiences, allowing students to work through emotions systematically. The output consists of emotional clarity, reduced stress levels, improved coping mechanisms, and heightened awareness of bullying dynamics. The evaluation component using rubrics, observations, and reflective analyses ensures ongoing monitoring of student development.

This structured flow demonstrates how the program guides students from emotional activation toward regulation and resilience-building. It also mirrors key psychological frameworks: catharsis theory through emotional release, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy through cognitive reframing, and Social-Emotional Learning through the cultivation of emotional competence. Altogether, this linear yet flexible structure underscores the program's adaptability to diverse school contexts.

Table 2. Session structure as presented in the teacher guidebook

Step	Duration	Description and purpose
1. Opening grounding activity	3 minutes	Short breathing or mindfulness exercises to stabilize emotional state before writing
2. Prompt introduction	2 minutes	The teacher introduces the theme or writing focus for the day to provide cognitive direction
3. Expressive writing activity	20 minutes	The main writing task where students articulate emotions deeply and freely
4. Guided reflection	3 minutes	Optional reflection for integrating emotional insights, consistent with SEL frameworks
5. Closing emotional check-in	2 minutes	Ensures students end the session in a regulated state; the teacher monitors emotional safety



Figure 1. Conceptual flow model of the expressive writing program

3.1.4. Evaluation instruments identified

The guide includes qualitative evaluation tools intended to help teachers monitor students' emotional progress, as presented in Table 3. These evaluation tools are not psychometric instruments but pedagogical assessment tools designed to support teachers in understanding students' emotional development. They enable educators to identify emerging emotional patterns, monitor shifts in coping capabilities, and evaluate the depth of students' reflective growth, while also ensuring that emotional safety is maintained consistently throughout the program.

Table 3. Evaluation instruments from the teacher's guide

Instrument	Function
Reflective writing rubric	Assesses emotional depth, self-awareness, coherence, and authenticity of expression
Observation checklist	Tracks engagement, affective responses, and behavior during writing activities
Interview guide (conceptual)	Helps identify changes in coping strategies and emotional understanding

3.2. Discussion

3.2.1. Summary of main findings

Analysis of the guidebook demonstrates that the expressive writing program is designed with a clear and structured format that makes it feasible for teachers to implement consistently. The program incorporates a series of emotion-focused writing activities—such as daily journaling, letters to oneself, and narrative reflections that provide students with constructive avenues for processing their experiences related to bullying. Its session flow is intentionally balanced, beginning with grounding activities and concluding with emotional check-ins, ensuring that students engage in expressive writing within a safe and regulated environment. In addition, the guidebook includes qualitative evaluation tools, such as reflective rubrics and observation checklists, which enable teachers to monitor students' emotional development over time.

Furthermore, the program's structured design aligns with Vygotsky [24] sociocultural theory, which emphasizes that higher psychological processes develop through guided support and the use of mediating tools. In this context, expressive writing functions as a psychological tool that scaffolds students' abilities to articulate emotions, reinterpret experiences, and gradually internalize healthier coping strategies. Teacher facilitation within the program also reflects the principles of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), where learners are supported to engage in emotional reflection at levels they would not yet achieve independently. Overall, the program reflects strong theoretical alignment with social-emotional learning (SEL), cognitive

behavioral therapy (CBT), Vygotskian mediated learning principles, and catharsis-based mechanisms, indicating a solid conceptual foundation for fostering students' mental resilience.

3.2.2. Interpretation based on expressive writing theory

Consistent with the findings of Pennebaker [5] and Pennebaker and Chung [19], the program design operationalizes several core mechanisms of expressive writing. Writing activities within the program function as a medium for emotional release, enabling students to express and externalize difficult feelings in a cathartic manner. Through narrative reconstruction, students are guided to reorganize their experiences, particularly those related to bullying, into coherent stories, thereby supporting deeper meaning-making and facilitating cognitive integration of emotional events. Furthermore, the program's emphasis on repeated and structured writing practices helps cultivate emotional regulation, as consistent expressive writing has been shown to reduce emotional reactivity over time. These mechanisms are embedded in the program through the use of focused writing prompts and guided reflection activities, which collectively reinforce the therapeutic benefits highlighted in the expressive writing literature.

3.2.3. Theoretical interpretation (SEL, CBT, Catharsis)

The expressive writing program demonstrates strong theoretical coherence with established educational and psychological frameworks, particularly SEL, CBT, and catharsis-based mechanisms. From an SEL perspective, the program cultivates key competencies through activities such as journaling, which enhances self-awareness, and the inclusion of grounding exercises and emotional check-ins, which strengthen self-management. This emphasis on internal reflection is consistent with findings showing that structured self-reflective practices such as self-evaluation and introspection (*muhasabah*) significantly contribute to students' self-regulation and emotional clarity [25]. The guided reflections incorporated into each session further promote responsible decision-making, enabling students to process their emotional experiences more thoughtfully.

In alignment with CBT principles, the program's letter-writing component provides structured opportunities for students to challenge negative self-beliefs, develop healthier internal dialogues, and reinterpret bullying experiences in more adaptive ways. Meanwhile, the narrative writing tasks operationalize the catharsis mechanism by encouraging students to transform emotional pain into coherent written narratives, thereby reducing psychological burden and fostering emotional relief. This transformative writing experience is also parallel to educational approaches that enhance students' uncertainty preparedness by engaging them in reflective, experiential, and meaning-making activities [26]. Collectively, these theoretical alignments underscore the program's potential to support meaningful emotional growth and resilience-building among students.

3.2.4. Practical implications

The findings of this study highlight several practical implications for teachers, schools, and national education policy. For teachers, the expressive writing program offers simple, ready-to-use strategies that help them provide emotional support and identify students who may be experiencing hidden distress. At the school level, the program strengthens anti-bullying efforts by serving as a preventive and supportive practice that fits naturally within homeroom, counseling, or character education sessions. Its reflective writing activities also contribute to a more empathetic school climate. This is particularly important because peer dynamics and social pressures significantly shape students' emotional experiences and coping behaviors [27], [28].

From a broader policy perspective, the program aligns with national child protection and anti-bullying agendas, offering a low-cost and scalable model for psychosocial support. Its simplicity and adaptability position it as a promising component for integration into the national curriculum, especially in contexts where peer and socioeconomic pressures may heighten students' vulnerability without structured emotional support [27], [28].

3.2.5. Challenges and real-world limitations

Despite its conceptual strengths, several challenges may arise in real-world implementation. Teachers may lack adequate training to facilitate emotionally charged writing sessions, which require sensitivity and trauma-informed awareness. Because expressive writing can prompt sensitive emotional disclosures, schools must ensure proper monitoring and support systems to prevent distress or traumatization. Additionally, practical constraints such as tight school schedules may limit the consistent implementation of the program. Most importantly, the current study cannot claim empirical effectiveness, as the program has not yet been tested directly with students.

3.2.6. Limitations

Given its conceptual nature, this study does not draw on interviews, observations, or authentic student writing samples. Consequently, the findings represent theoretical potential rather than empirically demonstrated outcomes. The model's effectiveness remains unverified and must be examined through future pilot testing to determine its impact on students' resilience and emotional well-being.

3.2.7. Recommendations for future research

Future studies should conduct pilot testing of the expressive writing program with real student participants to evaluate its practical feasibility and emotional impact. Mixed-method approaches are recommended to measure improvements in resilience, including qualitative reflections and quantitative pre-post psychological scales. Additionally, training programs for teachers should be developed to ensure that the expressive writing sessions are implemented with fidelity and emotional sensitivity. This combination will provide a stronger empirical foundation for assessing the model's effectiveness and informing broader adoption in schools.

4. CONCLUSION

The development of an expressive writing program model represents a novel and meaningful contribution to proactive bullying prevention and the strengthening of students' mental resilience in Indonesian schools. In a context where emotional well-being is increasingly recognized as essential to students' learning and holistic development, this conceptual model highlights how structured reflective writing can serve as an accessible, low-cost, and culturally adaptable tool for helping students process emotions, confront stressors, and build psychological strength. By positioning expressive writing not as an auxiliary activity but as an integral component of school-based psychosocial support, the model emphasizes the importance of giving students a safe and structured space to articulate internal experiences.

This study contributes by offering a theoretically grounded, SEL-CBT-catharsis-aligned model that provides teachers with practical guidelines, session structures, and evaluation tools. Although conceptual, the program design demonstrates strong potential for fostering emotional regulation, resilience-building, and healthier coping mechanisms. Moreover, the model supports the broader creation of an empathetic, reflective, and psychologically safe school climate that can reduce the long-term impacts of bullying.

However, this study carries inherent limitations. Because it is conceptual, no empirical data, interviews, observations, or student writing samples were analyzed. Therefore, claims regarding program effectiveness remain theoretical and warrant cautious interpretation. The program's practical impact, cultural fit, and sustainability must be examined through systematic empirical testing.

Future research is crucial to strengthening and validating this model. Recommended next steps include pilot testing the program with actual students, developing teacher training modules, and employing mixed-method evaluation such as thematic analysis of student writings alongside pre-post resilience or emotional well-being scales. Longitudinal studies are also needed to assess the enduring effects of expressive writing on coping, self-awareness, and resistance to bullying-related stress. Replication studies across grade levels, school types, and cultural contexts would enable broader applicability and cross-country comparison.

In addition, the model carries significant policy implications. Its low-cost, scalable structure aligns with national anti-bullying priorities and child protection mandates, making it a strong candidate for integration into character education, guidance counseling, and psychosocial support frameworks across Indonesia. With institutional support, cross-stakeholder collaboration, and sustained implementation, expressive writing can become a transformative educational practice that not only helps students heal but also fosters a more compassionate and mentally resilient generation.

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